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ABSTRACT

From the spring of 1986 to the autumn of 1988, the HM Inspectorate (HMI) undertook a survey of the quality of provision of education for 4-year-olds in primary classes. The work of 4-year-olds in 152 primary schools in 14 different local education authorities (LEAs), serving three London boroughs, four large metropolitan authorities, and seven shire counties, was inspected. The majority of schools were visited by HMI for a day. This report draws together the findings of the survey and comments on their implications. Sections concern admission policies and practice, planning and organization, and curriculum. In the area of provision, topics include staffing and staff development, accommodation, and resources for learning. A concluding commentary is provided. Findings suggest that the inclusion of children somewhat younger or older than 5 years of age in an infant class is not necessarily detrimental to good practice, providing the range of the children's educational needs is understood, the resources to meet those needs are available and used effectively, and class sizes are manageable. (RH)

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

REPORT BY HM INSPECTORS

on

A SURVEY OF THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION FOR FOUR-YEAR OLDS IN PRIMARY CLASSES

CARRIED OUT:- SPRING 1986 - AUTUMN 1988

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THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION FOR FOUR-YEAR-OLDS IN PRIMARY CLASSES

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THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION FOR FOUR-YEAR-OLDS IN PRIMARY CLASSES

INTRODUCTION

1. From Spring 1986 to Autumn 1988 HM Inspectorate undertook a survey of the quality of educational provision for four-year-olds in primary classes. The work of four-year-olds was inspected in 152 primary schools in 14 different local education authorities (LEAs), serving three London boroughs, four large metropolitan authorities and seven shire counties. The majority of schools were visited by HMI singly or in pairs for one day. This report draws together the findings of the survey and comments upon their implications.

MAIN FINDINGS

2. Many four-year-old children share their class with five-year-olds, but some are in classes which include six and seven-year-old children. Teachers frequently find it difficult to plan and sustain work that is well-matched to the needs of the under-fives and of older children within the same class.

3. Most of the teachers working with four-year-olds had been trained for the infant age range (5-7 years), but few had training or previous experience of teaching the under-fives. In a significant number of classes, the teaching is excessively formal and provides too few opportunities for active learning through practical work.

4. For the majority of four-year-olds the curriculum is insufficiently broad and balanced. In many classes there is an over-emphasis on some aspects of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy.

5. Frequently the quality of education is limited by the range of resources available. The educational purposes of play and investigative work are not sufficiently understood and provided for. Furthermore it is not uncommon to find four-year-olds using equipment more suitable for older children.

6. Where they exist, nursery assistants working with four-year-olds in primary classes usually have a markedly positive effect upon the quality of the education provided. Working alone, sometimes in classes with more than 30 children, teachers find it difficult to give sufficient attention both to the four-year-olds and to the older children.

7. Teachers have to give a considerable amount of time to ensuring that the four-year-olds settle into school smoothly. This involves contact with parents and overseeing arrangements for them to be with their children in school during the early stages. Teachers are hard pressed to make such time available while meeting the needs of other children in the class.

8. The best work with four-year-olds in primary classes reflects a suitable balance between directed and self-chosen activities. In such cases the teachers plan the use of time to interact effectively with individual and small groups of children. Where possible they involve other adults, parents or ancillary staff in classroom activities. This facilitates better organisation of the work, more suitable teaching approaches, increased adult-child interaction and a broader and better-balanced curriculum.

9. More effective practice usually occurs where early years teachers and advisers have focused attention on the provision for four-year-olds in the context of a mixed-age class, and where the quality of education is good in the school as a whole. In such schools the work is effectively planned throughout and is well resourced. Specific attention is given to the needs of children of different ages and abilities. From the earliest stage the children's work is carefully assessed and recorded to ensure continuity and progression in their learning.

10. Such practice is not common but shows what can be achieved when teachers are suitably trained and knowledgeable and when their work is well supported by other members of the staff and advisers, and by adequate resources.

ADMISSION POLICIES AND PRACTICE

11, For some years increasing numbers of children have started school before the statutory age of five. In some parts of the country the falling pupil roll in primary schools has led to children entering school at the beginning of the academic year in which they become five. This practice has tended to grow quickly and in a largely unplanned way. In January 1988 62% of all children aged four were educated in primary classes; a further 14% of this age group were in nursery provision.[1]

12. In the majority of the 14 LEAs children are admitted to school at the beginning of the academic year in which they become five. Occasionally full-time admission is preceded by attendance on a part-time basis for at least one term. In a smaller number of LEAs, although it is intended that children should begin school at the beginning of the term in which they became five, some are admitted earlier because of the availability of places; this can be confusing to parents, to other pre-school providers and to the teachers who have the task of effective long-term planning. Where schools admit children at different times of the year, LEAs sometimes have a written policy to ensure a planned and coherent admission pattern.

13. A number of the LEAs have a significant amount of nursery provision in separate schools or in classes attached to primary

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1. DES Statistical Bulletin 7/89; Pupils under five in each local education authority in England - January 1988.

schools. Admitting children early to primary classes had a detrimental effect on many of these nursery schools and classes, particularly where children spent three terms or less in the nursery. Furthermore the early admission of young children to school sometimes resulted in difficulties in the organisation of classes. In some cases, limiting the size and age range of classes with four-year-olds resulted in larger classes elsewhere in the school. In other cases four-year-olds were in classes with more than 30 pupils, sometimes of a wide age range, and often with no ancillary support.

14. The early admission procedures adopted by individual schools varied considerably. Most teachers arranged for the children and their parents to visit the school prior to admission. Some made contact with children's homes and families well ahead of entry, often through links with health visitors. Information about the school, its admission and curricular policies was made available to the parents through these direct contacts which sometimes included home visiting by the teachers. The large majority of four-year-old children entering primary classes attended school full-time from their enrolment, but most were admitted in small groups over the first few weeks of term. Transition from home to school was helped where parents stayed with their children and shared their initial school experience. This settling in period usually lasted for one or two weeks and, in a few cases for longer if the child needed it.

15. Some LEAs and schools encouraged the part-time attendance of four-year-olds where this was appropriate to classroom organisation and met with parents' agreement.

16. Headteachers and their staffs devoted considerable time to ensuring that the four-year-olds settled into school smoothly. The arrangements they made were beneficial to the children and valued by their parents, but the class teachers often found it difficult to give the necessary time to this important task while meeting the needs of older children in the class.

17. In many schools and LEAs effective links were established with other agencies, particularly health visitors, school nurses, educational welfare officers and educational psychologists. In one school for example, the meeting for parents, prior to the children's admission, was attended by the school nurse who explained the range of assessments that she would make during the child's first year in school.

PLANNING AND ORGANISATION

18. The majority of four-year-old children in the survey schools were in classes with five-year-olds. Heads, in the main, preferred to retain this form of organisation even though it meant that classes were larger in other parts of the school. In other cases the four-year-olds had been admitted to mixed-aged classes which included six and, sometimes, seven-year-old children. Teachers of such classes frequently found it difficult to plan and sustain work that was appropriate for children of

widely different ages and abilities within the same class. Usually the work for the youngest children was least well matched to their needs, but sometimes the older children failed to achieve work of a satisfactory standard.

19. Overall, insufficient attention was given to planning an appropriate curriculum for the four-year-olds in primary classes. Although the majority of schools had curricular documents for the whole school, only a small number adequately covered the provision for four-year-olds. Only two of the fourteen LEAs had a curricular policy setting out guidelines for the work with these children. Where LEA guidelines existed the response of the schools was variable, but where they were used effectively they had a beneficial influence on both planning and provision for four-year-olds. For example, the guidelines for the nursery and the reception classes in one school owed much to the LEA publication for the early years. They included suggestions on the work and range of skills to be covered, the use of the environment, the role of parents and continuity and progression in learning between the nursery and the reception class. This was a sound document that had a clear influence on classroom practice.

20. In the LEAs that had significant nursery provision, guidelines setting out aims and objectives for the pre-school age group already existed but had not been adapted or used to inform curricular policies in primary classes with four-year-olds.

21. Overall, the lack of clear guidance and agreement about aims and objectives resulted in poor progression and continuity. In a small number of cases teachers were skilful and intuitive in meeting the needs of young children but the absence of effective guidelines was a significant factor associated with the lack of planning, the weak assessment of provision and children's learning, and poor quality work.

22. Planning was often superficial and this was reflected in the pattern of the school day. Frequently mornings were devoted to the use of commercially produced language or mathematics schemes and afternoon sessions to a variety of activities which resulted in some curricular breadth but did not achieve coherence and continuity in children's learning. Often lessons in music and physical education were timetabled in the hall; on average for one and two sessions respectively. Very few schools provided opportunities for music within the classroom or for physical activities outdoors.

23. In the majority of primary classes with four-year-olds there was little evidence of teachers' systematic planning for the introduction and development of knowledge, concepts and skills through investigation, imaginative play, the use of natural materials or construction. The activities available frequently lacked an identifiable aim or purpose, for example children completed simple jigsaws or browsed aimlessly through books. Often children could choose an activity only after completing their language and mathematics work. In such cases the

activity rarely related to the rest of the curriculum or to current themes within the class.

24. The best work achieved a suitable balance between directed and self-chosen activities where the teaching and time was planned so that the adults could interact effectively with as many children as possible. Teachers responded to the requirements of the younger children in a variety of ways. Where possible, they involved other adults in the classroom activities. Parents helped regularly in some classes and were particularly successful where they received clear guidance about their role in complementing the teaching undertaken by the teacher. For example, in one class, guided by the teacher, two parents worked unobtrusively, engaging the children in activities and thoughtful conversation. They helped the children to use language appropriately when investigating early mathematical ideas. They encouraged them to make decisions and to plan and select materials for art and craft activities. They fostered good attitudes by helping the children to work cooperatively. In other classes, parents undertook a range of activities, such as helping to prepare practical work, supervising an area of the classroom where children needed to choose materials, for example, for art, and hearing children read. The involvement of parents in these ways was valuable, both in helping the four-year-olds directly or in helping the older children while the teacher spent time with the four-year-old children. Whether the help came from parents or from paid nursery assistants, where it was deployed well there were clear benefits to all the children in the class including the four-year-olds.

25. With few exceptions assessment and record keeping procedures were poor. Records were limited mainly to social profiles and attainments in reading and mathematics. Occasionally they included samples of the children's work in language and number. In many schools there was a lack of continuity with the work undertaken both in the nursery class and in other classes in the school. The issue to be confronted by the schools, is how to assess and record children's performance to reveal the strengths and weaknesses in their learning in order to provide a sound basis for planning work that is progressive. To do this successfully for each child in a mixed age class presents teachers with considerable problems, not least concerning the amount of time required for assessment and recording.

CURRICULUM MATTERS

26. The considerable variation in the quality of work with four-year-olds is reflected in the judgement that the work was assessed as less than satisfactory in one-third of classes and of an adequate standard in about half.

27. In more than half the schools there was an ill-timed or over-emphasis on some aspects of language and number work which resulted in a lack of breadth, balance and frequently, in the relevance of what was done, to children's developing abilities. The pattern of work, in many cases, was inappropriate in the way

in which the activities were sequenced; language work is a case in point. Too much work focused too soon upon the formal aspects of reading and writing when the four-year-olds undertaking it needed richer experiences for developing speaking and listening. Some of the least effective work resulted from the premature use of commercial schemes, workcards and consumable books. In such cases the children's understanding was poor and the standards achieved were less than satisfactory.

28. Much of the work for the four-year-olds in art and craft was heavily prescribed. For example, displays of completed children's work in over half of the schools indicated considerable use of templates which stultified the children's original ideas and standards of work were modest. The opportunities for learning from imaginative play were also limited. Home corners were often poorly resourced and used to occupy the children after they had completed set tasks rather than to contribute to their learning. In one school, however, imaginative play had been planned very carefully. The children were introduced to a range of attractive books about homes from which the teacher read extracts and pointed out important features of the illustrations. Discussion was followed by activities in which one group was asked to design material for the curtains of the classroom 'house'. The children had to design a pattern for printing on to the plain material provided by the teacher. They worked cooperatively in making decisions about colour and shape, and solved the problems involved in mixing paint to the right consistency. The teacher continually prompted the children to notice and to think about the different aspects of the task in order to achieve their objective.

29. In most classes, the four-year-old children took part, with others in their class, in timetabled lessons for physical education usually in the hall and, on average, twice a week. Setting appropriate challenges for all the children proved difficult for most of the teachers and much of the work was of a poor standard. Occasionally schools arranged more frequent movement sessions of fairly short duration. In such cases the quality of work was better. Four-year-olds in infant classes rarely had opportunities for outdoor activities due, in part, to the lack of access to suitable play areas and to supervision and resourcing difficulties but also because, in most cases, the value of outdoor play and the contribution it can make were not well understood.

30. Most four-year-olds had timetabled music lessons each week, usually one, occasionally two, in the school hall. It was difficult for teachers to find material that was suitable for all the children in the class and often the youngest children were insufficiently involved and benefited little from the work. A few schools provided music tables and opportunities for singing within the classroom. In such cases the work was often more meaningful to the children and of better quality.

31. Some teachers used everyday experiences and thematic work to develop the children's knowledge and understanding. In one class

a topic on snails stimulated good discussion, enlivened by the discovery that one of the snails had escaped during the night and left a silvery trail on the classroom wall. During a movement session the teacher reminded the children of the incident and used it as a starting point for their work. The children's response was good, not only in terms of physical education but also in the quality of the oral, written and illustrative work which stemmed from it. In another school work in science gave the children opportunities to suggest explanations and devise fair tests. After experimenting with bonding using play bricks a group of four-year-old children helped the caretaker, a former bricklayer, to build a real wall. They mixed the mortar themselves, experimenting until they finally managed to get the right consistency, and recorded the process in the class project book.

32. In the most successful work with four-year-olds teachers and other adults closely monitored the children's activities and intervened purposefully. In one school, for example, the classroom assistant had two large sacks of shoes. She showed some single shoes to the children and asked questions about colour, size and the materials from which they had been made. The children were invited to empty the sacks and find the matching pairs; this led to intense discussion and careful observation, sometimes prompted by further adult questioning.

33. These examples show that good standards of work can be achieved with four-year-olds admitted early to primary schools. Unsurprisingly the effective work with such children was in schools where the overall quality of education was good throughout:

> 'this is a very good school. Provision for all the children has been carefully thought out and matched to their needs. Through a perceptive and co-ordinated approach to the whole curriculum children are enabled to reach high standards, particularly in language, mathematics, art and craft. The planning of the work of the four-year-olds is an integral part of this and, after a comparatively short time in school, they are showing eagerness and quality in all their work'.

PROVISION

Staffing and staff development

34. Although a majority of the teachers working with the four-year-olds had been trained for the infant-age range, few had training or experience with children below statutory school age. The effect of the teachers' lack of experience with the under-fives was compounded by such factors as class size, the age and ability range within the class and, in most cases, the absence of appropriate ancillary assistance. In some schools with both nursery classes and four-year-olds in primary classes, there was

an anomalous position. The nursery classes had appropriate staffing, accommodation, resources and favourable staff ratios, yet, in adjoining rooms, four-year-olds were in large, sometimes mixed-aged primary classes without such resources.

35. In schools where ancillary assistance was available, sometimes from a National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) qualified nursery assistant, there were few instances where their time and expertise was devoted solely or mainly to working with classes containing four-year-olds. They were commonly deployed to work with all the classes in the infant department. In a few schools, where the nursery assistant worked entirely with the four-year-olds, other teachers were unable to benefit from such ancillary help. This created particular problems where the assistant had been redeployed to work solely within the classes containing four-year-olds from having worked more widely with other classes. Where new nursery assistants had been appointed to work with the youngest children, their help was an important factor in successful practice. However, a significant number worked predominantly in a supervisory and servicing capacity which did not use their experience and expertise to maximum effect. In the best circumstances, the invaluable assistance given to the teacher in helping to prepare and implement the work underlines the need to make the most of this ancillary provision.

36. Few LEAs have made appropriate and co-ordinated arrangements for the in-service education of teachers (INSET) prior to the admission of four-year olds to infant classes. There are exceptions however, usually where early years advisers were available and able to influence the planning and provision. In one shire county, for example, all the teachers who were to have four-year-old children in their classes in the following September were expected to attend a one day in-service course; subsequently this provision was expanded to a course of five days duration. In the term following the course each teacher was visited by an advisory teacher.

37. Recently INSET provision for teaching the under-fives has increased substantially. Most teachers of four-year-olds had attended some form of INSET in spite of the difficulties of releasing staff during the school day. The INSET provided ranged from single sessions dealing with a range of issues, to extended award-bearing courses. These initiatives were supported and extended by the growing number of courses and conferences provided by groups such as the British Association for Early Childhood Education (BAECE). The new priority areas in the LEA Training Grants Scheme (LEATGS) for the teachers of four-year-olds in primary classes will provide further focused training opportunities.

38. In spite of the encouraging amount of INSET work, there is little evidence as yet of schools adapting their existing curriculum significantly in response to the needs of four-year-olds in primary classes. More clearly focused in-service is needed to improve matters.

Accommodation

39. There was a considerable variation in the quality of classrooms and other teaching areas occupied by four-year-olds. Most were attractively arranged and maintained in good decorative and domestic order. It was clear that many schools had thought carefully about the rooms allocated to classes with four-year-olds. Occasionally this involved redesignation of teaching space in order to provide the largest area available in the school for the youngest children. Nevertheless, many of the teaching areas were too small to provide for a full range of activities and this had a narrowing effect upon the curriculum. In a small number of cases toilet and cloakroom space as well as storage and display facilities were inadequate.

40. In a few cases, school premises had been adapted to provide more suitable accommodation for younger children. In one school a new wing had been built; in another, in the same LEA, a former secondary school building had been adapted to provide good accommodation for the four reception classes. In addition to the adaptation costs, the LEA had allocated £8000 for refurbishment which included both furnishings and equipment. In a third, parents had adapted a former cloakroom to create an attractive carpeted activity area and a library.

Resources for learning

41. The survey showed that few LEAs and schools had recognised fully the resource implications of admitting four-year-olds to school. Provision for these children was judged to be less than satisfactory both in range and quality in over half of the classes. The most common deficiencies were in the provision of equipment for outdoor play, music, early work in science and technology, and materials for craft work.

42. Examples of better provision included a recently opened school where the provision for three- and four-year-olds in the nursery was linked with that for four- and five-year-olds in the adjoining reception class. The LEA adviser gave guidance to ensure that the provision was extended and the work progressed successfully. There was a good level of resourcing suited to the work with children aged three to five years. In another LEA additional funding was available for schools admitting four-year-olds into reception classes for the first time. Amounts varied from £200 to £800 depending on the number of children admitted; some schools raised additional finance through fund raising efforts with parents.

43. The management of resources was satisfactory in about half the schools. Many of the schools would have benefited from guidance from their LEA advisers in the better use of their existing resources, particularly where they were providing for younger children for the first time. Few schools had an overall resourcing policy which recognised the distinctive needs of the four-year-olds in primary classes. Where there were such policies they provided a reassuring planning framework for the curriculum and made for a more effective and efficient deployment of existing resources. The absence of clear policies frequently resulted in the disappointing and limited use of equipment and materials, even in classrooms where resources were better than average.

COMMENTARY

44. The uneven quality of the educational provision revealed by this survey calls for greater attention to the needs of four-year-olds in primary classes. In particular, schools that admit four-year-olds to primary classes require LEA guidance on the most appropriate ways of working with young children in these circumstances. Based upon that guidance, the schools need to formulate curricular policies and guidelines which provide for continuity and progression in learning from 3 or 4 onwards in order to meet the immediate learning requirements of the youngest children and to prepare them for subsequent stages of their education.

45. The role of adults is clearly important. If the provision for four-year-olds in primary classes is to improve there needs to be:

- systematic staff development designed to enable teachers of young children to understand and provide for their particular learning needs;
- opportunities for teachers, nursery nurses and other ancillaries to discuss and plan their work together;
- arrangements for NNEB qualified assistants to work mainly, if not wholly, with the youngest children in the schools to which they are appointed;
- increased opportunities for parents to assist in the classroom under the supervision of the teacher.

46. Some LEA's have yet to adopt clear admission policies and to recognise the resource and curricular implications of admitting four-year-olds to the primary school. Where admission policies are clearly stated schools should be encouraged to keep to them unless exceptional circumstances arise.

47. The introduction of the National Curriculum has consequences for the educational provision for children under-five if they are to be well prepared for statutory schooling. Like all under-fives

the four-year-olds in primary school classes need a thoroughly considered and well-planned curriculum which takes account of their developing abilities and is not unduly limited by pressures upon the teachers to provide for older children within the same class.

48. The findings of this survey suggest that the sharing of an infant class by children within reasonable limits of the age of five is not necessarily detrimental to good practice, providing that:

- their range of educational needs is understood;
- the resources to meet those needs are available and used effectively;
- class sizes are manageable taking into account the age range of the children and the number of adults available to teach them.